DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 144 EA 019 143

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TITLE Establishing and Maintaining an Effective Board/Superintendent Relationship.
PUB DATE 14 Nov 86
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Carolina State School Boards Association (Winston-Salem, NC, November 1986).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Qualifications; Administrator Role; Administrator Selection; *Board Administrator Relationship; Board of Education Role; Elementary Secondary Education; Interpersonal Communication; Meetings; *Organizational Communication; *Superintendents

ABSTRACT

This paper presents two separate but related addresses on the subject of the relationship between school boards and superintendents. The comments of Frances Harrison, chairman of the Rocky Mount City (North Carolina) Board of Education, focus on the importance of the superintendent selection process and on elements of the board-superintendent relationship that are critical to establish from the first. The person selected as superintendent must be not only eminently qualified but must have a personal and administrative style that meshes well with the board's style. An effective relationship depends on mutual trust, mutual loyalty, and clearly defined roles. Shared experiences of both a formal and informal nature, apart from regularly scheduled meetings, can also help build rapport. The comments of Travis Twiford, superintendent of the Rocky Mount City Schools, focus on effective communications and meetings. The board-superintendent relationship should be open, with both sides free to initiate communication while remaining aware of the other party's time constraints. Regular publication of interesting information, specificity in communications, and personal dialog are also important. Open but well-planned meetings with predictable agendas that allow all participants to prepare also add to good relations. (PGD)

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ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING AN EFFECTIVE BOARD/SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONSHIP

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EA 019 143

(A Presentation for the North Carolina State School Boards Association, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, November 14, 1986)

Comments by Dr. Travis Twiford, Superintendent, Rocky Mount City Schools, and by Frances Harrison, Chairman, Rocky Mount City Board of Education

We have been very fortunate in Rocky Mount throughout our 85-year history to have had fine superintendents, all of whom have been well qualified and commendably dedicated. This fact leads me to what I think is the first requirement for building and maintaining good relations. That is: be exceedingly careful in selecting the person who will lead your district. Make sure that he is professionally qualified, has the proper credentials, and that his references check out appropriately. All that is routine, but any of us who advertise a vacancy will also receive applications from persons who do not meet all these criteria. These applicants, however, should be sent a gracious "thank-you-for-your-interest-in-our-school-system letter." Your serious contenders will come from the remainder, and your finalists may even be persons whose applications you've sought beyond the applications you've received but not specifically solicited. In any case, when you know who your finalists are, you will want to interview thoroughly for personal qualities that will make your choice a good fit in your district. We've been told often that the most important single act the Board has to perform is to employ a superintendent, and I believe that. It is critical to choose a person the board can agree on. If the board

is divided into hostile camps to begin with, it is unreasonable to think that much harmony is going to result. Finding a person who is professionally qualified, who wants to be your superintendent, and who has a personality you can live with ought to be possible. There is no need to erect for yourself such obstacles as intransigence, unwillingness to accept other people's opinions, and inability to communicate. The poor superintendent is stuck with his board, and some board members may be stuck with each other, but at least conflict can be minimized if the superintendent fits as well as possible into the scenario that's already in place.

What qualities and attributes of the board and the superintendent contribute to their ability to get along consistently in a pleasant and productive way? There are a number of these, and you, no doubt, have your own list. I would like to suggest several:

First, any good relationship must be built on trust. Your superintendent must be a person of unquestioned integrity and the board must deal with him on that same basis. You must feel free to share concerns with him in full confidence that you won't hear yourself quoted or misquoted in the wrong place. He must have the same assurance. Trusting implies that you can be honest with each other, and you certainly need to. None of us who have minds of our own are going to agree all the time but our differences need to be honestly and agreeably explored so that they may be productively resolved. Keeping secrets from each other does not lead to open understanding.

Loyalty is an important component of good board-superintendent relations. The board and the superintendent must support each

other and each person must endorse the decisions made by the group. The group decision must become the group action and everyone must work together for the good of the students. The board and the superintendent are a team and they must perform like a team. There is no place on a team for the selfish pursuit of personal agendas that are not a part of the team's design. Neither the superintendent nor any individual board member has the right to abrogate the decisions of the board, or to make public statements in criticism of such decisions, and to do so on either part can only lead to controversy and disharmony.

It is imperative that the role of the board and the role of the superintendent be clearly delineated and thoroughly understood by all parties. Poor relations probably result more frequently from trespasses in this area than in any other. To be protective of one's turf is a virtually universal response. Everybody knows that the board is a policy-making body and the superintendent is an administrator, but what we know and what we practice may not be in complete conformity. The greatest care must be exercised to see that overlaps and intrusions do not occur. There are inevitably some gray areas, and it is not too structured to clear these up once and for all with detailed written guidelines. Interpretations are possible, and each board and superintendent must arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement. The important thing is that everybody knows what the guidelines are and abides by them consistently. A good superintendent carries out the directives of the board, but it is totally unfair to expect him to sort out the board's confusion or to blame him if he misconstrues a situation that lacks clarity. A good

board ensures that the superintendent knows what is expected of him, demands that he do his job in a superior fashion, and then gives him latitude to perform his tasks in a professional manner and supports him loyally while he does it.

It is useful to spend time together on occasions other than scheduled meetings of the board and committees. Retreats are an excellent idea, and every board has issues and ideas that need to be explored in depth. These times provide an opportunity for questions and conversation that help board and superintendent to know where each party is coming from as time is available and the climate is conducive to detailed discussion. The less constrained agenda provides opportunity for the superintendent to share the background information that his training and his professional position make available to him so that the board becomes more aware of important considerations.

Aside from the formal encounters, it is important for the board and the superintendent to know each other in more personal ways. Informal contacts on pleasant occasions foster goodwill and improve communication. Our board and superintendent do a lot of things together. Often we include our families. We have several purely social events each year. We usually have a cookout or a picnic in the summer and the superintendent and his wife and the board chairman always have parties during the holiday season. We recognize important events like the advent of new board members or the superintendent's completing his doctorate or a visit by VIP's with a social occasion. We even have lighter moments before a committee meeting while we enjoy prize-winning chocolate-chip cookies provided by our School Food Service staff. The hard decisions are easier to make in harmony when we know

each other as people as well as colleagues in the business of managing the educational enterprise. When we go to conferences, we try to travel as a group. Our superintendent makes handsome arrangements (that is, he tries to secure our newest and least rattle-y van) and we all ride together, usually sustained by goodies thoughtfully provided by our faithful folks. The superintendent frequently drives us, and we've offered to buy him an appropriate chauffeur's cap. A lot of camaraderie can be generated in these times together.

In short, the members of our board are friends, and our superintendent is our friend too. We chose him and he chose us; we respect him and he respects us; we try to do our job and he does his; together, we are a team working deliberately for the kids in the Rocky Mount City Schools. I believe that these are major components of good board-superintendent relations.

Comments by Dr. Travis Twiford, Superintendent, Rocky Mount City Schools:

Communication is a very key component of establishing and maintaining a good board/superintendent relationship. This process of communication must be a two-way process. Board members should not expect the superintendent to assume all of the responsibility in this field - nor should the superintendent expect the board members to assume that responsibility. Both should feel free to initiate communication whenever it is needed and appropriate. Both should, however, respect the time constraints of the other and should distinguish between information needing immediate attention and that

information which would be nice to know. Information needing immediate attention should be dealt with by a quick phone call or a personal visit. Information of a general background nature should be held for other forms of communication. For information of a general background nature I send out a publication called "Notes From The Superintendent." In that, I talk about items that would be of interest to the board members, items which do not need formal board action. I also clip news or magazine articles which may be of interest to the board members and include them in the "Notes." Items like "State Board Meeting Highlights" or editorials are also included.

Our annual report to the community is another way we stress communication. This widely distributed publication presents to the public information about things taking place in the school system. We attempt to present the data in an interesting and informative way, but it always presents a picture of unity of purpose and administrative philosophy. We do so by concentrating the report on the successes of our students rather than nebulous terms of educational jargon.

Both the board members and the superintendent must communicate in clear terms. Have you ever talked with someone for 15 minutes and at the end wondered what was said? That kind of communication has no place in the board/superintendent relationship. Say what you mean - and always mean what you say. If information you have can be substantiated, give the source. If it is just a feeling or gossip, identify it as such; then all parties have access to the same general information. If follow-up action is needed on a communicated item, be certain that the parties are clear on what the follow-up assignment is -- be specific.

The key to successful communication is the establishment of goals. These goals must be clearly stated and mutually accepted by all parties. The process of establishing goals comes easy if everyone accepts - and honestly believes - that the focus of the school system is on the students.

The final point on communication is to have a frequent dialogue with board members. My secretary knows that board members have a direct access to my office if there is an immediate need. I also have a private phone line which does not go through the main switchboard if they need to reach me directly and quickly and even confidentially. The board chairman and I meet most Wednesdays for lunch. During that time we share ideas, attempt to anticipate problems, talk about programs, discuss problems and review agendas for upcoming meetings.

Meetings are another way to improve the superintendent/board member relations. Meetings should be a free forum of discussion and all ideas and feelings on each issue should be expressed; however, meetings should not become personal forums for the board members or the superintendent. All discussion should relate to the goals of good communication and all comments should clearly focus on the board's student-centered philosophy.

Agendas for meetings must be planned well in advance. All parties need to know how to get items on the agenda. Agenda items should be reviewed with the chairman and any foreseeable problems should be identified and discussed before the meetings. We even discuss contingencies on how sensitive or difficult problems might be handled, should they arise.

Always get the information about the meeting out early so the board members have the opportunity to review it. Provide board members with the appropriate background information on the agenda items so that they will be able to make informal decisions. Board members should be encouraged to seek additional information about an item if they feel the need. This information should be provided before the meeting - not during the meeting. The superintendent should never withhold information from a board member if he wants a good relationship.

One unwritten, but important rule that our board has is that we do not surprise each other. As superintendent, I never add an item without consulting the board or they never say - toward the end of a meeting - "Oh, by the way..." These kinds of things have the potential to put us in very difficult situations which do not give any of us time to properly research the issues. This practice can only lead to strained relationships and a public image of confusion.

Agendas for board meetings need to be predictable. We have a consistent agenda format - not items. Our meetings always start by recognizing guests, giving the public the opportunity to comment on agenda items, and presenting a "Good News" report. The good news portion of the agenda gives us the opportunity to recognize board members, staff and school programs for contributions to the school system and the community. It also serves to let the media know about our involvement. The next items are always committee reports, followed by the superintendent's reports. One item of the superintendent's report always relates to curriculum. We feel this is an important part in order to reinforce the emphasis of the system.

When students and instruction are spotlighted, board members and the superintendent are constantly reminded of the purpose of their roles and the necessity for maintaining an effective relationship.